

# FEAST

## Jugglers, Comediennes, and Muay Thai Kick Boxers Converge at the Meatball Shop



Kate Lord

back row, from left: Nesim Behalel (sous-chef), Elana Villabona (front of house manager), Joe Carragher (cook), John Dearth (cook), Juan Cuzco (cook) and Dexter Jackson (cook). Middle row, from left: Gregorio Cornejal (busboy), Scott Jaffe (chef), Damien Domenack (front of house manager), Fernando Ponce (cook) and Rowdy Leath (cook). Front row, from left: Stephanie Jalove (front of house manager), Michael Chernow (general manager/co-owner), Daniel Holzman (executive chef/co-owner) and Devon Mercado (pastry chef).

Upper East Siders and childhood comrades chef Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow opened The Meatball Shop in February, but the amount of press the hyper-focused concept receives makes the project feel as though it's been around much longer. People line up in the heat of August for the Le Bernardin and SPQR alum's variations of the hearty Italian staple served as you like them — in a bowl over polenta; on a hero roll; as a slider; or even vegetarian, with a short but diverse selection of sauces, and a side of [renowned ice cream sandwiches](#). Maybe it's because, as Chernow says: "Everybody's got a meatball story." Another possibility: The dauntless staff in this week's Class Photo makes it fun.

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**Name:** Nesim Behalei, 30

**Role:** Sous chef. "The focus is on good food with no fuss or pretension, and having fun, staff included. I've worked in restaurants for 13 years: New York, Paris, and Mexico. I came back to New York, sent out my resume, Dan called me. He said, 'I see you have a very fancy resume. We make meatballs.' I thought 'wow, very refreshing.'"

**Hails from:** Born in D.C., raised in Italy, now Midtown East

**Future plans:** "Every culture has amazing street food so my dream would be to open places that fill in the holes where various cuisines are missing. I see it in Paris, London, New York, Tokyo. Theme-specific, relaxed, young. I figure I'm going to stick around for years first; I love this team."

**Off-hours:** "I cook all the time, even when I'm off. I like to have people over."



**Name:** Scott Jaffe, 30

**Role:** Chef. "Daniel will be taking himself off the schedule soon and I will be replacing him in a couple weeks. I'm a very large part of making sure that every person who walks through this door is fed a hot, good, bowl of meatballs."

**Hails from:** New Hyde Park, NY now East Village

**The restaurant serves over 1,200 meatballs a day, how many do you eat?** "I eat a few meatballs because I have to test them, somewhere between four to 20 a day? My favorite is the spicy pork with Parmesan cream sauce over polenta — it's amazing."

**Can you get creative with the program?** "We do special meatballs on a weekly basis and recipes for holidays. We did a St. Paddy's Day ball, a Cinco de Mayo ball. Recently, we did a steak-and-bacon cheddar ball, which is phenomenal. Before the summer is over we're going to try to do barbecue, maybe a pulled pork ball."

**Off-hours:** "I can juggle. Every once in a while if I have a couple oranges in the kitchen, I'll show it off. Nobody's very impressed by it."

**Well, have you juggled meatballs yet?** "No."



**Name:** Stephanie Jalove, 29

**Role:** Manager/waitress. "I come to work prepared to serve massive amounts of people for ten hours. I take their excitement when they come to the door and ride with it. It's a hustle but it's fun."

**Hails from:** Chicago, now East Village

**Off-hours:** "I keep my days free for creative pursuits like acting and photography. I'm funny. I'm a comedic actress. Originally when I came to New York, I said I wanted to be on 'Saturday Night Live,' but now maybe something more badass, like an action drama, hero or something."



**Name:** Michael Chernow, 29

**Role:** Co-owner/GM. "We hit the nail on the head here. It's everything I want. It's accessible and it's nostalgic — everybody's got a meatball story."

**Hails from:** "Upper East Side, now Williamsburg

**What are your expansion plans?** "I am a strong believer in structure and foundation. Before I anticipate exploding this brand into something it's not, I really want to make sure this is a well-oiled machine. That being said I think this concept works anywhere and everywhere. Little kids love this food; old women love this food; and everyone in between."

**Off-hours:** "I am a Muay Thai kick boxer. It's a Thai form of martial arts. I got into it about six years ago. I've always been an athlete, I fell in love with it, and I was pretty serious until I opened up The Meatball Shop. I have done tournaments. There's not real belt system, but I'm alright [grins]. I've done well for myself."



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**Name:** Devon Mercado, 20

**Role:** Pastry chef. "I kind of lucked out because I finished culinary school in April and I got this job, and I'm 20 and I'm the pastry chef, which is pretty good. My goals are going forward. I got into pastry because my mom was always the one who cooked for events like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and there were never desserts. I love desserts so I took it upon myself and started baking at 13."

**Hails from:** Bushwick, BK, now Ridgewood, Queens

**Future plans:** "I plan on opening my own spot [gestures towards scalp tattoo] called C.H.U.D.: Canabalistic, Humanoid, Underground Desserts. The décor will be based off of the movie *C.H.U.D* and *Clockwork Orange*. A dessert bar, but I would like it to be like the Cake Shop where it's a venue, a real home environment, where local artists display their artwork and local bands can play. I'd like to make the desserts upscale but basically not charge so much for something that has such simple ingredients: flour, sugar, butter. Hopefully, I can open it within in the next three to five years."

**Off-hours:** "I work on new recipes for The Shop. I really like making ice cream. The Blackberry-raspberry one we're serving is my recipe."